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WILD LIFE PRESERVATION IN INDIA: ANNUAL REPORT FOR 1953 ON THE EASTERN REGION

BY

E. P. GEE, M.A., C.M.Z.S.,

Honorary Regional Secretary, Indian Board for Wild Life

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I. THE EASTERN REGION

During the year 1953 the Eastern Region under the Indian Board for Wild Life comprised the following States: Assam, Bengal, Bihar, Manipur, Orissa and Tripura.

The North East Frontier Agency, an area containing rich and varied wild life and some of the finest mountain and river scenery in India, is not included in this Region. It is to be hoped that in the near future the N.E.F.A. will be in a position either to form its own Wild Life Board or to send representatives to the Assam Wild Life Board and thus become co-ordinated with Assam in the matter of wild life preservation.

Similarly, Bhutan is adjacent to Bengal and Assam and has mutual problems concerning wild life preservation; and it would be in the interests both of India and Bhutan if the latter country could be closely associated with India in this respect. The same kind of problems exist on the borders of Bihar and Nepal, and it would also be in the interests of both these States if concerted action could be taken to preserve wild life.

II. WILD LIFE IN THE REGION

Rhinoceros. Perhaps the most valuable animal in the Region is the Great Indian One-horned Rhinoceros, and its numbers may now be estimated as follows: Assam 347, Bengal 43, Bihar 2 (and Nepal 48). There are signs of a revival of interest in the Jaldapara Sanctuary of Bengal, and this factor should enable the depleted rhino population of that area to be increased to what it was some twenty years ago. Officially I believe there are no rhino in Bihar, but it is reported that occasionally a few of the fifty or so animals of Nepal wander across the border into India. It might be possible to create a sanctuary in the Champaran District of Bihar in order to provide a refuge for these stragglers from Nepal; and this sanctuary might in later years develop into a safe stronghold of this most important creature.

Elephant. It is fortunate that the wild elephant appears to be able to hold its own in spite of the advance of civilisation into its habitat. Although its numbers are being constantly reduced by capturing and controlled shooting wherever damage to crops is reported, its prolific nature leads us to feel assured of its continuance in the future.

Gaur ('Bison' or 'Mithan'). This fine animal is becoming much rarer in north-east India, chiefly owing to its susceptibility to diseases spread by domestic cattle and buffaloes. It is recommended that it be protected as much as possible.

Buffalo. In spite of rinderpest this animal continues to survive in safe numbers in Assam and north Bengal, and in some parts of Orissa. The sad news has been received from the Chief Conservator of Forests, Bihar that 'the wild buffalo of Purnea also probably has vanished with the privately-owned forests were its last refuge and were cut down'. It is essential that domestic cattle and domestic buffaloes of graziers and villagers adjacent to wild buffalo sanctuaries should be compulsorily inoculated against rinderpest. Some research is needed into the question of the advantages or otherwise of the crossing of tame buffaloes with wild ones, as there are conflicting accounts of the quantity of the milk supply and of the quality of the offspring after such crossings have taken place.

Swamp Deer. Unlike the sambar which frequents thick forest and hilly regions, the swamp deer confidently inhabits the more open places and presents an easy target to poachers and others. Because of its meat value as compared with the hog deer, the swamp deer has become exceedingly rare in the States of this Region and requires the most rigid protection—especially in sanctuaries.

Serow and Goral. These goat-antelopes are also in need of protection. (Takin and Musk Deer exist in the mountainous areas of the N.E.F.A. and Bhutan, and are therefore outside the scope of this report.)

Thamin or Brow-antlered Deer. In spite of enquiries and search by the Forest Department in Manipur, no trace can now be found of this beautiful deer which once existed in fair

numbers in that State¹. This is most unfortunate and a great loss to the wild life of India. Owing to its habit of wandering from place to place in search of grazing etc., the prospect of re-introducing it from Burma is not feasible. Moreover the Burma Brow-antlered Deer is a different sub-species.

Pygmy Hog. This peculiar diminutive pig seems to have disappeared from the foothills of Bhutan, though it used to be found a few decades ago in the forests of Assam (and Bengal) adjoining Bhutan.

Clouded Leopard. The progressive reduction in the numbers of the carnivora is the natural result of the gradual decrease in the populations of deer and such other animals, but the rarity of the clouded leopard led the Mysore Conference of the Indian Board for Wild Life to recommend this beautiful animal for full protection. It is to be hoped that its preference for thick forest will prevent its becoming extinct.

Florican. Owing to the clearance for cultivation and the opening up by grazing of large tracts of grassland, the Bengal Florican has become rare in recent years. A number still exist in Kaziranga Wild Life Sanctuary in Assam, and it is to be hoped that this bird can be saved from extinction in all the States of this Region.

Pinkheaded Duck. Reports of this duck having been seen or shot in recent years are open to doubt owing to the fact that many people confuse the Pinkheaded Duck with the Redcrested Pochard. It is a regrettable fact that there is no really authentic evidence of the Pinkheaded Duck having been seen in the last few years.

White-winged Wood Duck. This duck still exists in Assam, at any rate. As it can be kept in captivity fairly easily, the possibility of rearing it in zoological parks or private gardens should not be ignored.

Monitor Lizard and Python. These two reptiles are protected in some States of the Region, but unfortunately the trade in their skins goes on unchecked. Information obtained at the receiving end in this trade (e.g. Calcutta) reveals that many persons out in the mofussil are collecting these skins, and the matter needs careful investigation.

III. STATE WILD LIFE BOARDS

I. Assam. The Assam Wild Life Board was constituted on 8th June, 1953, and consists of 10 members comprising 4 officials and 6 non-officials, with the Minister for Forests as Chairman and the Senior Conservator of Forests as Secretary and Convenor.

The first meeting of this Board was held on 9th and 10th September, 1953, in Shillong.

¹ Since reported to be surviving in small numbers in Manipur.—Eds.

A great number of items was dealt with, and two sub-committees were formed, one for framing rules etc. for the Board, and one for revising the Assam Forest Regulations in so far as they deal with the protection of wild life and for drafting a simplified version of the Arms Act as applicable to Assam.

2. *B e n g a l*. No Wild Life Board as such exists in Bengal, and the Conservator-General of Forests has informed me that it is not considered necessary to create a Wild Life Board as there already exists the Forest Advisory Board. To what extent this Forest Advisory Board will be able to deal fully and efficiently with all the problems of wild life preservation I am not at present in a position to say. Possibly the appointment of a few additional members to represent wild life and sporting interests might solve the problem, or perhaps a technical sub-committee to deal with wild life matters might be preferable.

3. *B i h a r*. The Bihar Wild Life Board was constituted on 3rd December, 1953, and consists of 11 members comprising 5 officials and 6 non-officials, with the Minister for Forests as Chairman and the Chief Conservator of Forests as Secretary and Convenor.

4. *M a n i p u r*. The Manipur Wild Life Board was constituted during the year, with the Deputy Commissioner as Chairman and the Forest Officer as Secretary, with four other members.

The first meeting of the Board was held on 21st October 1953 at Imphal. Among the many items dealt with was the complete closing of shooting in the Logtak area, which has been made into a sanctuary.

5. *O r i s s a*. Information has been received from the Director of Forests, Orissa, that the State is trying to constitute a State Wild Life Board.

6. *T r i p u r a*. So far no information has been received concerning the constitution of a State Wild Life Board.

IV. WILD LIFE RESERVES, SANCTUARIES AND NATIONAL PARKS

1. *A s s a m*. Steps are being taken to up-grade the Laokhowa and Orang Reserves into Sanctuaries, and the Kaziranga and North Kamrup (Manas) Wild Life Sanctuaries are to be constituted as National Parks under the Assam National Parks Bill now in draft form. It would be to the advantage of Assam as well as of Bhutan if the latter State could create a sanctuary or national park on its side of the boundary north of and adjacent to the North Kamrup Sanctuary of Assam, and a proposal has been sent to Bhutan concerning this.

2. *B e n g a l*. The Conservator-General of Forests has informed me that they are putting up a proposal to the Government for the management of the Jaldapara Sanctuary as a national park.

3. *B i h a r*. At present there are only four sanctuaries in the State, totalling just over 250 sq. miles. The Chief Conservator

of Forests has informed me that the creation of a national park is contemplated, or alternatively a large sanctuary covering about 200-300 sq. miles in extent.

A very noteworthy fact which should be mentioned here is that the Forest Adviser of the Soil Conservation Department of the Damodar Valley Corporation has drawn up a detailed proposal for a national park or wild life sanctuary in the D.V.C. Area, which is to be forwarded to the Bihar Government for their approval. The area selected is one of 320 sq. miles of Sal forest 13 miles from Hazaribagh. The opportunities offered by the changing of the countryside by these multi-purpose river projects should be quickly grasped by nature conservationists, as here are good chances of effecting some sound wild life preservation and even of restoring species which have become extinct in recent decades.

4. M a n i p u r. The Logtak Lake area has been made into a sanctuary, and shooting closed there throughout the year. While commending the authorities of Manipur for their good intentions in creating a sanctuary for the preservation of wild life, I personally, as well as many other naturalists, doubt the wisdom of choosing the Logtak Lake area for this purpose. Now that the Brow-antlered Deer has disappeared, the chief wild life of this area is the wildfowl which frequent the lake. But these are mainly migratory, and in plentiful numbers; and I feel that some other place, perhaps in the hills where wild life is being exterminated by shifting cultivation and other evils, could have been more wisely selected. Moreover, the Logtak Lake used always to be a favourite shooting ground for *bona fide* sportsmen visitors to the State, and their absence will be regretted in more ways than one.

5. O r i s s a. I have no information as to existing or proposed sanctuaries in Orissa.

6. T r i p u r a. The Forest Officer of this State has informed me that the opening of a wild life sanctuary is under the active consideration of the authorities.

V. WILD LIFE LEGISLATION

1. The effectiveness of Existing Legislation.

This item need not be dealt with State by State, for the same story is heard in all the States of this Region, as in other Regions. It is not so much the lack of effectiveness as the lack of enforcement of the existing legislation. As became apparent at the Mysore Conference, the machinery for preserving wild life exists all over India but has become neglected and in some cases fallen into disuse.

There are two alternatives now: one is to revive the old legislation and strictly enforce it, and the other is to make new and up-to-date legislation. I am in favour of the latter course, provided it is not too elaborate or difficult to enforce. I consider the Bombay Act of 1951 an excellent piece of legislation for the preservation of wild life, but can it be enforced? According to this Bombay Act, if a man shoots a bulbul, say, in his own vegetable garden he is liable to

prosecution. There is no chance of such intricate legislation being properly enforced.

I feel that a simplified and up-to-date form of the Wild Birds and Animals Protection Act of 1912 might be the answer. A rationalised and simplified schedule of close seasons and protected animals and birds, easy of enforcement, is desirable.

I also recommend that first things be done first; that is pay full attention to the sanctuaries first and make them proof against poaching and properly guarded; then pay attention to the reserved forests and make them proof against poaching and all illicit practices; and then after these two items have been fully dealt with turn attention to the unclassified forests, waste lands, private lands, and so on.

Under the present state of legislation, detection of offenders is difficult and charges hard to substantiate. And when a case is successfully brought and proved, the magistrate imposes an absurdly lenient fine—Rs. 60, say, for a hog deer killed and valued at Rs. 120 for its meat, or even for a sambar valued at Rs. 400. These fines were probably fixed some 50 years ago, and since then the value of money has changed, but not the fines.

The Forest Department, which has control of all sanctuaries and reserved forests, can 'compound' a case for up to Rs. 50 only. This 'fine' was also fixed some 50 years ago, and by the present value of money should be raised to Rs. 200. If a Divisional Forest Officer could compound cases of offence against the Forest Regulations with a fine of Rs. 200 and also possibly with a liability of the offender to pay the amount of damage done (as is sometimes done in Bengal—a good idea), the immediate protection given to wild life would be very great indeed. In fact I feel certain that the first step in any proposed legislation of any kind should be the revision and improvement of the State's Forest Regulations in so far as they apply to wild life preservation.

Holders of 'crop protection' guns are well-known as responsible for extermination of much wild life. Since the handing in of these guns after the crops have been reaped presents a great administrative problem, it would perhaps be a better idea if the use of these guns is restricted to the area of crop-producing land actually belonging to the possessor of the gun, and if he wishes to shoot elsewhere he must obtain an extra licence. Licence fees for possession of guns and for shooting with them should be increased—these again are in many cases the same as they were 50 years ago when the value of money was much greater than now.

2. New Legislation Passed or Contemplated.

(1) *A s s a m*. The draft Assam Rhinoceros Preservation Bill was scrutinised by the Assam Wild Life Board, and modified in places where considered necessary. An Assam National Parks Bill has been drafted and will soon be placed before the Wild Life Board for approval. Sub-committees have made proposals for the Rules etc., of the State Wild Life Board, and for the revision of the Assam Forest Regulation.

(2) *B e n g a l*. Proposals are being put up to Government for the management of the Jaldapara Sanctuary as a national park. The Conservator-General of Forests is of the opinion that Forest Officers should be invested with the powers of a police officer to demand the production of a licence and of a gun for examination. The Government has renewed the leases to the Associations of the Game Federation of Bengal.

(3) *B i h a r*. Measures contemplated are: Rationalisation of the 'Close' season for all kinds of birds and animals; the enactment of a special law applicable only to the State-owned Forests which will provide for deterrent penalties, including confiscation of fire-arms and cancellation of licences of habitual offenders, and the creation of a national park, or in the alternative of a large sanctuary covering about 200-300 sq. miles in area.

(4) *M a n i p u r*. Certain Rules have been framed in accordance with the Indian Forest Act to effectuate proper control and preservation of wild life.

(5) *O r i s s a*. No information has been received up-to-date of any legislation either passed or contemplated.

(6) *T r i p u r a*. Measures contemplated are: creation of a wild life sanctuary, and rules for shooting.

VI. GENERAL

It is generally agreed, particularly in the Eastern Region of India, that a separate wild life organisation is not feasible, and that wild life preservation is best taken care of by the Forest Department under whose charge most of the wild life already falls.

To counteract the possibility that the Minister for Forests and the officials of the Forest Department may not always act in a way best calculated to serve the interests of wild life, it has been accepted that each State should have a Wild Life Board whose main function will be to advise the Forest Department on all matters affecting wild life. Obviously these Boards must contain a strong, influential and knowledgeable element of non-officials, who should fully represent all important sections of public opinion and should contain among their number some experts in the field of nature conservation, natural history and sport.

In order that the Forest Department, advised by the Wild Life Board, may efficiently carry out its duties, it is essential that the Forest Regulations should be revised and brought up-to-date.

The State Forest Department can do a very great deal by strong executive action in the way of Gazette Notifications. For example, in Assam there used to be shooting of sanctuary animals all round the Kaziranga Sanctuary, just outside the boundaries. But a Gazette Notification issued on April 6th, 1953, declared a buffer zone all round Kaziranga Sanctuary with specified limits, within which shooting is prohibited the whole year. The result has been very encouraging, and poaching round the fringes of the sanctuary has almost entirely disappeared.

A great deal of shooting by artificial light at night from machans over salt-licks and from vehicles takes place, and indiscriminate poisoning and dynamiting of fish in rivers. This is often connived at, if not actually done by subordinate officers of all the Services. In addition to warnings of severe penalties to be imposed, I think some publicity needs to be done to instill into these subordinate officers the best traditions of sportsmanship and sport of all kinds. For example, if military officers were interested in the sport of fishing with rod and line, they would not connive at their men dynamiting rivers for fish.

Information on the wild life of the States of the Region is urgently required, and it is recommended that the series 'Wild Life Reserves in India' as published by the Bombay Natural History Society (Bihar by Jamal Ara in Vol. 48, No. 2, pages 282-287 and Assam by E. P. Gee in Vol. 49, No. 1, pages 81-88) be continued and include the other States of the Region and of the Indian Union as a whole.

It is a welcome sign that in all the States of this Region there is a growing realization that much publicity for wild life preservation needs to be done in the Press, Radio and in Education. It is well-known that the best way of educating the adults is through their children. What is urgently wanted are suitable text-books, one for each stage of school and college curriculum, illustrated and well produced, to stress the need for nature conservation, preservation of wild vegetable and animal life and all allied subjects. In matters of wild life preservation conversion is easier than coercion, and once the children have been shown the value of wild life, the enforcement of legislation will become very much less difficult.

February 15, 1954.